

## Divergences in Smoking Patterns among Younger and Older Rhode Islanders, 1988 and 1998

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The 23rd annual Great American Smokeout will occur on November 18, 1999. While the prevalence of smoking among U.S. adults declined steadily from the mid-1960s through the 1980s, the decline slowed in the 1990s. An estimated 47 million adults in the U.S. (about 23% of adults ages 18 and over) smoke cigarettes, even though smoking cigarettes will result in death or disability for half of all regular users.<sup>1</sup> Approximately 80% of adult smokers started smoking before age 18.<sup>2</sup> Decreasing the number of cigarette smokers in the U.S. and preventing the initiation of smoking among young people remain major public health challenges.

This paper compares patterns of cigarette use among Rhode Island adults in 1998 with use patterns in 1988 based on data from Rhode Island's annual Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS).

**Methods.** The BRFSS is a national telephone survey of randomly selected adults (adults ages 18 and older) who live in households with telephones. It asks respondents questions about a variety of health-related behaviors, including tobacco use. The BRFSS is performed by 50 states and 4 territories with funding and methodological standards provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).<sup>3</sup>

The BRFSS has been conducted in Rhode Island continuously since 1984, and by a professional survey contractor since 1990. In 1988, 1,763 Rhode Island adults were interviewed, or approximately 150 per month. In 1998 the sample size was increased to 3,602, with 300 interviews conducted each month.

Key questions on tobacco use in the BRFSS have remained unchanged or have been modified only slightly between 1988 and 1998, so that respondents can be categorized across years as follows:

- **Current Smokers:** Have smoked 100 or more cigarettes during their life, and smoke now. Current smokers can further be categorized as:
  - **Current Regular Smokers**, that is, persons who now smoke every day, and
  - **Current Irregular Smokers**, that is, persons who now smoke but not every day.
- **Former Smokers:** Have smoked 100 or more cigarettes during their life but no longer smoke.
- **Never Smoked:** Have not smoked 100 or more cigarettes during their life.

In addition, current regular smokers can be categorized by the number of cigarettes usually smoked each day.

**Results.** The prevalence of current smoking (which includes both regular and irregular smokers) decreased from 26.0% to 22.6% between 1988 and 1998. (Figure 1) The proportion of current smokers who are regular (everyday) smokers dropped from 92% to 82%, while the proportion who are irregular smokers increased.

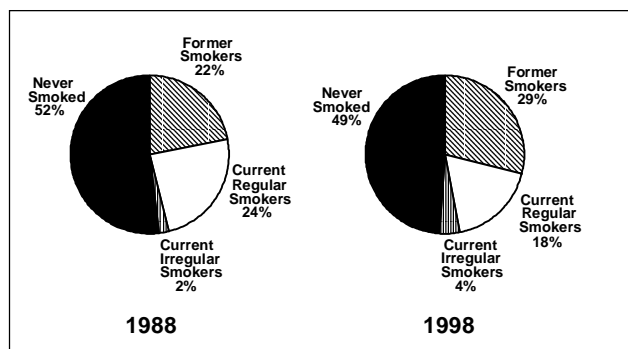


Figure 1. Smoking Patterns among Rhode Island Adults Ages 18 and Older, 1988 and 1998.

The prevalence of current smoking decreased among persons ages 25 and older. However, among those ages 18 - 24 the prevalence of current smoking increased from 21% to 30%. (Figure 2) The prevalence of both current regular and irregular smokers in this age group has increased, but the greater increase (from 14% to 30% of current smokers) has occurred among irregular smokers. (Figure 3) The increase in smoking among young adults parallels trends of increased smoking prevalence among adolescents observed in national and state studies over the past decade.<sup>4,5</sup>

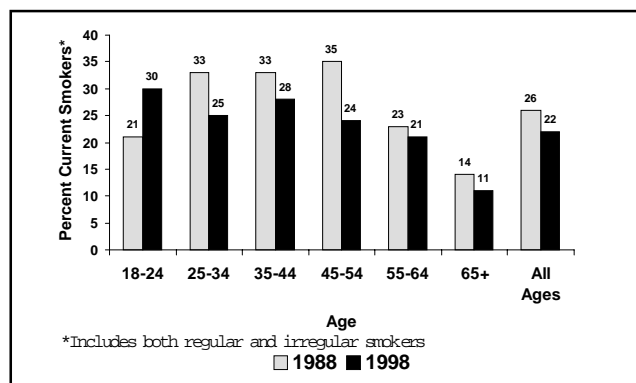


Figure 2. Current Smokers\* among Rhode Island Adults by Age, 1988 and 1998.

The decline in adult smoking rates can be attributed entirely to adults who have quit smoking, rather than to a decline in smoking initiation. The proportion of adults who are former smokers has increased from 22% to 29%, while the proportion who never smoked decreased from 52% to 49%. (Figure 1) Among those ages 18-24 the proportion who are former smokers has remained virtually unchanged (10% and 11%) while the proportion who never smoked decreased from 69% to 59%. (Figure 3)

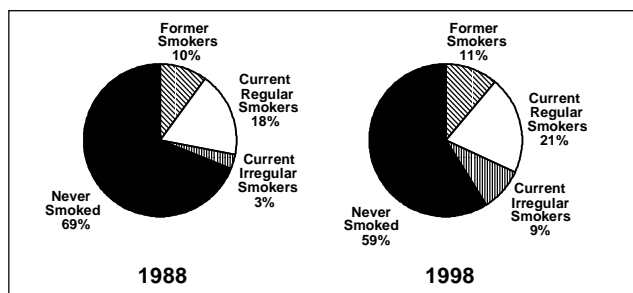


Figure 3. Smoking Patterns among Rhode Island Adults Ages 18 - 24, 1988 and 1998.

Among current regular smokers ages 25 and older, it appears that an increasing proportion are heavier smokers who may find it very difficult to quit smoking. The proportion who

smoke more than 1 pack of cigarettes a day has increased from 24% in 1988 to 27% in 1998. Among those 18-24, the proportion smoking more than 1 pack per day is much lower (10% in 1988 and 8% in 1998).

**Discussion.** These data indicate clearly that the tobacco industry has been successful over the past decade in recruiting new smokers among young people. The increased smoking prevalence among young adults has partially offset the successes of smoking cessation campaigns and programs among adults ages 25 and older. Further reductions in adult smoking prevalence will require increased efforts to prevent smoking initiation among adolescents and young adults, as well as smoking cessation efforts to help heavier smokers quit.

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